Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 19 | Issue 1 Article 6

1-1-2002

The Abolition of Sin: A Response to Adams in the Augustinian Tradition

Katherin A. Rogers

THE ABOLITION OF SIN: A RESPONSE TO ADAMS IN THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION

Katherin A. Rogers

Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas located the source of human misery in sin, freely choosing against God. Sin is permitted by God because the dignity of the human creature requires that it be able to make free choices and live with their consequences. In *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Marilyn Adams critiques this view and offers an alternative explanation. I argue that Adams's criticisms do not connect with the traditional view and her proposed alternative entails conclusions which Christians should find insupportable, including the abolition of sin and the view that God is not good in any meaningful sense.

The tradition in philosophy of religion represented by Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas located the source of human misery in sin, freely choosing against God. Sin is permitted by God because the dignity of the human creature requires that it be able to make free choices and live with their consequences. In her recent book *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Marilyn McCord Adams critiques this free fall theodicy and suggests an alternative view of the source of horrendous human suffering. In this paper I argue that the criticisms which Adams raises do not connect with this traditional view and show that her proposed alternative seems to entail a cluster of conclusions which most standard-brand Christians should find insupportable, including the abolition of sin and the view that God is not good in any meaningful sense. My argument is aimed not at Adams's entire discussion of how the existence of a loving God may be seen to be compatible with the existence of horrendous evils, but at the narrower issue of her views on the *sources* of such evils.

For the purposes of this paper I shall cite Augustine as the most important and influential Christian philosopher to advance the free fall theodicy which Adams repudiates and refer to the tradition which followed him as "Augustinian". I shall also appeal frequently to Augustine's eleventh century follower, Anselm of Canterbury, who, in my estimation, improves on Augustine's basic view by introducing a libertarian position on human choice.[1] I take it that the vast majority of the major Christian thinkers in the Latin west from the time of Augustine at least through Aquinas in the mid-thirteenth century accepted the basic outline of this Augustinian tradition as I shall present it, and that it is the standard view of the Roman Catholic Church and many contemporary philosophers of religion.[2]

FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY
Vol. 19 No. 1 January 2002

I. Adams' criticism of "free will" approaches

How could a good God permit horrendous evils? Horrendous evils are, "evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole...examples include the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov,..."[3] Adams holds that it is not entirely subjective what might constitute a reason to doubt the value of one's life, nonetheless one's own estimate should be considered a major piece of evidence.

This definition of horrendous evil is somewhat problematic. What constitutes horrendous evil is apparently supposed to be belief-neutral, but surely one's judgement about what constitutes a reason to doubt the value of someone's life is dependent on one's other views. Augustine, Boethius, and the Augustinian tradition insisted that the participant in evils was made by a perfectly good and providential God who holds out the hope of everlasting beatitude for those who cling to Him. Chosen despair is a sin. Accepting this belief, it would never be reasonable, even prima facie, for the innocent victim or the repentant perpetrator of evils, to doubt the value of his life. In fact it would verge on the immoral.[4] Be that as it may, the fact of terrible human suffering is indisputable, and theists need to address it. I shall continue to use Adams's term "horrendous evils" to apply to the kinds of terrible human suffering which her list illustrates.

How can we explain a good God's permission of horrendous evils? According to Augustine, and every orthodox Christian thinker at least up through the Renaissance, God made human beings good. Augustine very explicitly rejected the Platonic notion that there is something wrong with being embodied.[5] In the prelapsarian condition soul governed body as it was meant to do, and Adam and Eve were able to refrain from sin and were not afflicted with suffering. The natural strength of the properly ordered mind and body were so great that even the sort of suffering which results from natural phenomena in the fallen world could not afflict unfallen humanity.[6]

If the view that prelapsarian human beings would not have suffered at all strikes one as implausible, remember that the issue for us here is not suffering per se but the enormous suffering which constitutes horrendous evil. As examples of extreme suffering which is apparently unconnected to moral choice Adams mentions "the father's nonnegligent accidental running over of his beloved infant son, or a person's slow, degrading death by cancer."[7] A possible Augustinian line might be that it is at least possible that in a world where human beings had lived up to their potential from the beginning infants would not be left where their fathers might nonnegligently run over them, nor would brakes or steering fail unexpectedly. Health care would be far superior to what it is such that, if anyone does die of cancer, they do not do so in a degrading way. Perhaps there is suffering and death, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that unfallen humanity might have avoided horrendous evil.[8] Augustine himself held, following Paul, that death is the wages of sin.

Alas, though it would have been so easy to keep God's command, Adam and Eve disobeyed. In rejecting the rightful authority of the source of all value and being, the first people brought upon themselves unending war: a war of rebellion against God; a war of the soul against itself now that it has abandoned the source of its knowledge and judgement; a war between soul and body because the soul has turned away from the source of its power to govern. Peace cannot be restored by the war-torn human being and so the embattled condition, with its consequent weakness and ignorance, is inherited through the generations. Only a radical intervention by God can set things right, hence the Incarnation.

If it was the fall that introduced the possibility of horrendous evil, why did God permit it? It is Anselm who, to my mind, puts the answer best, and I gather that the standard position of the Roman Catholic church follows his line. In order for the rational creature to gain merit and, in a sense, contribute to its own creation, it must be able to choose the good *a se*, from itself. But since it *is* a creature of God's, choice *a se* is possible only through the genuinely open option to obey God or not. If it were made so that it could do no other than obey, it would not choose *a se* and hence would not merit eternal beatitude.[9] In order for Adam and Eve to be really good, it had to be possible for them to fall. And that is the path they chose. What about the rest of us? We can only be saved by grace, but Anselm preserves the meritorious freedom of the creature by holding that we can accept grace or reject it.[10] Here he differs from Augustine who, at least in his later writings, insisted that grace was irresistible. Augustine ultimately adopts a compatibilist view of freedom which assigns all power in the universe to God and renders very difficult any attempt to absolve God of the responsibility for sin and suffering. In this paper I shall focus on the strand in Augustine which locates the source of sin and suffering in the choice of rational creatures, and avoid the issue of whether or not this is consistent with his other views.

Adams sums up Augustinian free fall theodicies, "Thus, even in Eden Adam and Eve are credited with an agency easily able to trigger horrendous evils of cosmic proportions!"[11] Quite so. Adams holds that these attempts "to shift responsibility for horrors from God to humans fail, for at least two reasons."[12] First, the rational agent cannot be fully responsible for horrendous evils since our knowledge and ability to empathize are so limited that we cannot really understand the depth and magnitude of the suffering we inflict. And secondly, it is not choice alone which produces horrendous evils, but choice within an environment which renders the dire consequences possible. God is responsible for the environment.

Neither of these points connects with the traditional position. Augustine and his followers do not locate Adam and Eve's responsibility for horrendous evil in an ability to "understand the depth and magnitude of the suffering" which would follow from their choices. The claim was never that Adam and Eve are culpable because they set out to inflict untold misery on themselves and their offspring. Presumably they had no clue of the horrors their disobedience would produce. They are at fault because they disobeyed God. On the Augustinian understanding that is the essence of sin. Whatever else is wrong in choosing evil, whatever harm it

does to oneself and others, the root of sin is that it rejects God, the absolute source and standard of all value in the universe. Anselm makes the point in the most radical terms arguing that you should not reject God even to save the whole world.[13]

On the Augustinian understanding envisioning the suffering your choices cause is not requisite for responsibility. And this seems to accord with our ordinary legal and moral reasoning. Admittedly one who truly understood the depth of the misery he intended to inflict might be worse, more culpable, than one who did not. Nonetheless we do not acquit you of murder because you didn't or couldn't appreciate the suffering of your victim. Perhaps the Augustinian can agree with Adams that if Adam and Eve had actually understood and intended to produce the results which the Augustinian tradition ascribes to the fall, then they should be judged even *more* responsible. Or, if responsibility is considered an all or nothing property, they might be more *guilty*. Nonetheless in order to succeed in the attempt to "shift responsibility for horrors from God to humans...," it is enough that the tradition hold the first people *sufficiently* responsible, and for that, in the Augustinian view, all that is required is that they knowingly chose disobedience to God.

The point that bad choices only have horrendous consequences because they occur in an environment for which God is responsible misses the Augustinian mark as well. In making her case Adams offers the analogy of the three-year-old put by his parent into a room with a stove which will explode should the child turn a nob and ignite the gas. If the parent leaves the child alone, and the child disobediently turns the nob, it is the parent who is mainly to blame for the ensuing horror. Note first that for the analogy to connect with the Augustinian position there must be a very good, possibly necessary, reason for the stove to be there in the first place. The Augustinian view is that the natural environment and its constituent elements are all intrinsically good things, each of which contributes to the order and beauty of the whole and may possibly be necessary for the existence of human beings.[14]

And, of course, the force of the analogy depends upon the child being a three-year-old. If the child were thirteen then the fault would not lie with the parent since the older child is capable of rational choice. We do not hold the hands of our teenage children as they cross the road because, even though we recognize the possibility of calamity, we judge that it is important that they be allowed to navigate the world on their own. The Augustinian tradition held unfallen human beings to be made in the image of God in that they were rational agents, and far more successful human beings than we are today in that they were properly ordered to their creator and to their own minds and bodies. They possessed the native strength and intelligence to cope with their environment in such a way as to live free of suffering. Adams has a very different view of human nature, which will be discussed below, but unless and until she has made a convincing case for her view she cannot import it in evidence against the tradition. The Augustinian position is that God made the world a very good place in which people could have been consistently happy had they not chosen to destroy their relationship with Him.

Adams goes on to argue that, given her points above about how diluted human responsibility must be, the punishment for sin proposed by the classical tradition is out of all proportion. It is unreasonable to suppose that a good God would inflict the suffering of horrendous evil, temporarily in this life and permanently in the next, as retribution on those who fail the test of freedom and choose wrongly. Adams mentions a "free fall" alternative to the Augustinian view of the consequences of sin which she associates with some contemporary philosophers of religion who advocate what she calls a "mild hell." The idea is that, rather than inflicting punishment on the sinner, God respects the sinner by allowing him to live out the natural consequences of his choices in a hell which is not as bad as the hell of the tradition. She judges this mitigated hell extremely unlikely. If the natural goal of the rational creature is communion with God, anything less must mean misery. There is no second best in the theistic universe. Adams is also extremely skeptical that allowing us to destroy ourselves is the best way for God to respect our dignity.[15]

How would the Augustinian tradition assess these points? First, it is something of a false dichotomy to oppose the "natural consequences" approach to an Augustinian punitive view of earthly suffering and hell. Augustine and the tradition do indeed speak of the justice of the punishment inflicted upon the sinner. But it is not as if one could sin and be fine were God not to step in and introduce retribution. Sin *is* the rejection of God, of which the natural and inevitable consequence is the disintegration of the order necessary for the maintenance of the happy rational animal. The sinner chooses separation from God, and that, according to Augustine, is the worst of the torments of hell.[16] On the other hand, the tradition would wholeheartedly endorse Adams's criticism of a "mild" hell. In the final analysis, if you are not for God you are against Him, and there is nothing worse than that.

What of the point that a good God could not stand back and let us destroy ourselves? I will have more to say on the dispute between Adams and the tradition on the question of what is due to human dignity. Here I would like to mention briefly that from a purely philosophical point of view, it is not clear that the traditional free fall approach is inconsistent with universalism. Let me hasten to add that I am not myself defending the universalist position. My own method in philosophizing about religion is to weight the tradition of the Church very heavily and the tradition has clearly taken Scripture in its more obvious sense which entails that some are damned. I merely want to suggest that this is not a conclusion which is entailed by free fall theodicy.

There are universalist scenarios consonant with at least certain aspects of the Augustinian approach. Anselm argued that while grace is necessary for salvation, the human being can accept or reject it. It is logically possible, though Anselm takes it to conflict with tradition and Scripture, that God offers grace to everybody, and everybody freely accepts it, so all are saved. Apparently it would also be logically possible for all to reject it and be damned, but given that there is a radical asymmetry between the choice for God and the choice against Him in that the former leads to eternal beatitude and the latter to endless misery it seems that the possibility of universal sal-

vation is far more real than the possibility of universal damnation.

A second option might be that those who freely accept grace and are saved receive the sort of beatitude consonant with their merit as rational agents who have chosen *from themselves* to love God, while those who reject God are stripped of their freedom and *caused* to choose Him. Thus everyone is saved, although there will be two ranks in the heavenly multitude and presumably two grades of beatitude. The forcibly saved might enjoy a sort of "mild heaven." The tradition, at least as exemplified by Anselm, might find fault with this scenario. He might hold that it really is better for God to allow the sinner to live out his choices, and that coercive salvation renders the sinner something less than fully human. The standard Augustinian view is that even a bad human is a better kind of thing than a good dog. But intuitions conflict. The contemporary philosopher may conclude that for the individual it is better to be a happy sub- or at least unfree-human than an everlastingly miserable and/or disintegrating human. So, if it could be proven that a good God must provide everlasting happiness for all his rational creatures, the free fall theodicist has coherent options.[17]

II. Adams's alternative account of the source of horrendous evils

Rather than blame horrendous evil on human sin, Adams offers an alternative account built upon two key elements; the metaphysical size gap between God and man, and a conception of evil which, rather than focusing on morally bad choices, draws on the paradigm of "uncleanness and purity". Adams also discusses "honor and shame" but it is unclear how or whether she intends this alternate paradigm to help explain our current susceptibility to horrendous evil. I shall discuss only the "uncleanness" paradigm.

Adams and the Augustinian tradition agree that much contemporary philosophy of religion posits a God who is too small, who is bound by external moral rules and so is not the absolutely independent source of all. They agree that God is not just another, bigger, member of our moral community. But Adams goes further. Not only is God bigger than many contemporary philosophers realize, human beings are a great deal smaller than either contemporary or classical free fall theodicists imagine.

Anselm saw human freedom as the gift which God gave to man in order to allow him to imitate divine *aseity*. Sin and its consequences were the price paid for this human dignity. In the contemporary literature a popular analogy of the relationship of God to man is the loving parent who stands back to let the teenage child make its own decisions because that is the only way it can become a mature person. Adams holds that "human dignity" has been greatly overrated. We are not as teenagers to our Father in heaven, we are infants. God would not do us a favor in standing back and letting us reap the consequences of our behavior any more than would a mother who left a baby to its own devices. The mother's interfering with the baby's activity can hardly be interfering with its free agency, since it doesn't have any. Rather the care of the mother is "agency-enabling or-developing — in other words, those that supply necessary preconditions for the "smaller" agent to function at all."[18] The gap between God and man is

analogous. "The metaphysical gap between God and creatures means that however mature adult human agency may seem in relation to other human beings, it never gets beyond (up to?) the infantile stage in relation to the Divine."[19] Apparently in Adams view the sort of agency which the enabling work of the Holy Spirit leads us to will never be the sort of free agency which Anselm and other free fall theodicists envision.

Adams holds that the metaphysical gap places God outside of the human moral community. The Augustinian tradition would certainly have agreed that God is not just another moral agent, but Adams associates with her position several consequences which theists, classical and contemporary, are likely to find startling. At least some of her remarks imply a rejection of moral realism in favor of a view that sees morality as a practical human construct. She writes that, "...human society involves role expectations and some system(s) of mutual evaluation and accountability. Relative to my opponents, I have celebrated this fact by dwelling on how humans have invented and deployed a variety of such schemes—the purity and defilement calculus..., the honor code..., and, most recently, morality. Each of these schemes has proved its usefulness in contributing to social order and stability." She goes on to hold that she has not "...denied morality a place at the table or contested its usefulness in regulating contemporary societies. Nor have I doubted that we have moral obligations..." Still, she confesses "...to the suspicion that moral categories never get to the evaluative heart of the matter...the fact that morality is a more useful framework for evaluatively challenged human collectives scarcely commends it as penetrating to any normative core!"[20]

It is possible here that Adams is using the term "morality" in an unusually narrow way. For example, she implies at one point that "moral categories" are exhausted by "strict deontological or consequentialist approaches...."[21] In discussing Mother Teresa, Adams writes that she responded "as a beloved daughter returning love's initiative...eschewing moral categories."[22] Someone using a broader sense of "morality" might hold this to be simply a false dichotomy. She certainly implies that some behavior is bad even if those it affects are happy with it, as her discussion of the degradation of slavery indicates.[23] Thus Adams does not present a developed or robust denial of moral realism. Still, she says enough to be disquieting, especially when coupled with the second conclusion she draws from the position that God is not a member of our moral community.

According to Adams, it follows from the metaphysical gap that, objectively speaking, we cannot behave rightly or wrongly vis-a-vis God. Thus, "...because of the size gap nothing we could be or do could count — simply by virtue of what it is — as an appropriate move in relation to God, any more than a worm's wiggling to the right could be intrinsically more respectful of humans than its wiggling to the left."[24] If she really means this, then Mother Teresa's loving behavior is no more appropriate in relation to God than Hitler's hateful behavior. Adams's view is clearly very different from that of Augustinian theism. For Augustine and his tradition the fact that God is the Creator produces both the metaphysical gap *and the bridge that spans it*. God does not just *have* goodness, rather He *is* the goodness by participation in which other good things are good. Human morali-

ty, which would include but not necessarily be exhausted by the duties of justice and beneficence, has absolute objectivity because it is rooted in the divine nature, and our actions can be better or worse in relation to God because we can imitate Him more or less adequately within the limitations of our nature. On the Augustinian analysis it is precisely the extent to which anything reflects the being of God that it has any value of any sort.

Adams allows that God may issue commands and enter covenants with humanity. "—God is too big to squeeze into any humanly contrived social role. But God can create a social order that networks God and humans together. God can assign Godself a role that clarifies expectations, makes interactions safer and more predictable. At the same time, the Divine social order invents roles for us. Just as human civil law confers value, turns paper worth a few cents into $100 bills, so Divine legislation establishes statutory definitions of what will count as a fitting or appropriate response by finite creatures to God."[25] The implication seems to be that "sin" in the traditional sense, willing against the will of God, could at most be a failure to obey a command which is intrinsically arbitrary. This impression is reinforced when she goes on to offer examples from the Hebrew Bible of commands of which the purpose "is to separate Israel out from other nations, by imposing commands and prohibitions that will make her behavior *different* from theirs."[26] The implication is made again in Adams's approving discussion of the honor/shame model in which God is the patron and humanity the client such that "Divine covenants invest God's honor in the relationship, turn the behavior and condition of His clients into conventional signs of how much there is "to" God."[27] Again, Adams does not offer a developed divine command theory, but what she does say seems clearly at odds with the Augustinian tradition, in which the standard for human behavior is not assigned or conventional, but rather is rooted in imitation of the necessary and immutable nature of God.

In any case, Adams makes it clear that in her view, human choice is not the problem. "Where free fall approaches locate the root obstacle to at-one-ment in created free actions contrary to God's will, and so in what humans *do*, my contrary proposal finds the fundamental difficulty in a metaphysical devaluation of humankind in relation to Divinity, and so in what both God and humans *are*."[28] But why should our being a great deal smaller than God result in so much evil? There is more to the story.

Rather than looking at a paradigm which focuses on free agency, Adams suggests that we look at "purity and defilement" which sees sin as "uncleanness, an outgrowth of two metaphysical roots."[29] Not only are we on this side of the great metaphysical divide from God, but we are also corporeal. We are hybrid creatures of body and spirit, and "...the material, corporeal, animal distracts mind's cognitive and evaluative attention, disrupts its balance, lures it into preferring lesser to greater goods...Whether normative relations are understood in terms of elimination (as with ascetic aims to amputate bodily concerns) or subordination (where reason rules but gives animal needs a voice), theory and experience witness that these are difficult to achieve, that stable virtue is easily out of reach for most."[30] But God is not at fault for creating us as embodied beings. Matter is not evil *per se.* "...God *loves* material creation..."[31] It's just that we are spiritual animals

and this "metaphysical straddling is the source of human contamination with horrors."[32]

III. Insupportable consequences

According to Adams we find ourselves subject to participation in horrors because we are at such a metaphysical distance from God, and because we are hybrid, "unclean", creatures of body and spirit. A first question, then, is this: Are the metaphysical gap and the "uncleanness" necessary? Is it that God *could* have made us more successful creatures and failed to do so, or is it that He *could not* have made us any better than we are? If creatures fitting the description of human and possessed of the sort of dignity which Augustine et al. took to be the essence of human nature could have been created, one would think that a good God would have made them. Adams never questions the assumption that the free agents posited by the Augustinian tradition are made metaphysically closer to the image of God than are her unclean infant humans. Her argument is just that we *are* the latter and not the former. (Proving that Anselm is actually right and Adams wrong about the sort of freedom and dignity possessed by human beings is a task which lies beyond the modest scope of this paper. Here I am concerned only to point to the consequences of rejecting the tradition in favor of Adams's alternative.)

An Adamsian might suggest that it is better for God *not* to make us as the dignified free agents of the Augustinian tradition, since that entails that we will have the option to reject Him. Adams, in responding to the "mild hell" advocates writes that they, "...come close to assuming that God and human adults are moral peers in insisting that we (like adolescent and adult children) have the right to reject God and to erase as completely as possible any trace of family resemblance. My own view is that this is not the right sort of respect for a being like God to pay to creatures like us."[33] Assuming it *would* be the right sort of respect for God to pay to the free agents of the Augustinian tradition aren't we safer being infants?

Augustine himself would almost certainly have responded that it is better for the world as a whole to contain the better sort of creatures, and he would have added that it is better for the creature itself, even if it suffers, to be a better sort of thing. It is better to be an unhappy man than a happy dog.[34] Perhaps this is a matter of fundamental intuitions. I find the Augustinian thesis plausible. And there is more to be said. The Augustinian tradition held that at least some of these free agents are saved by embracing divine grace. And, being made so closely to the divine image, they merit and are able to enjoy an everlasting beatitude far better than could a creature much more distant on the metaphysical ladder. Since Adams apparently grants that Augustinian humans are more god-like, I take it she would allow this entailment. Should God really not make creatures as like Himself as possible because some might reject Him and suffer? Should no one enjoy the sort of union with God envisioned by this tradition because all may not? True, some may judge their lives not to be great goods on the whole, but others will enjoy the greatest possible beatitude, which would not be available to the lesser creature.

If it is argued that a good God would not allow participation in horrendous evil to go undefeated in the lives of *any* of His creatures, then we can add the "mild heaven" option mentioned earlier. For those who persistently reject God, He can step in and treat them as infants, negating their choice and forcing (a somewhat diluted) beatitude upon them. The traditionally-minded will be uncomfortable with what they will take to be a violation of the nature of the creature. If this objection overrides the point about the defeat of horrendous evil in the lives of every individual then the best world is one in which God makes the creature in His image and lets those who choose suffering suffer. But an Adamsian might judge that God *ought* to interfere with the nature of a person who is bent on self-destruction. In Adams's view nobody ever rises above the infant level anyway, so the suggestion here is that God may simply demote the unrepentant sinner to the metaphysical position which she takes all humans actually to occupy. And, as in Adams's universe, everybody is saved. The difference is that those who can enjoy the beatitude of a true *imago Dei* do so.[35] This seems an obviously better world than the one which Adams supposes ours to be. So it seems that God's goodness is called into question if we take it that He has *chosen* to create us so distant from Himself.[36]

But perhaps the metaphysical gap, with its consequent participation in horrendous evils, is a *necessary* result of our hybrid "uncleanness" in being body and spirit. Adams discusses C.E. Rolt's view that "Material nature dictates an evolutionary process in which created suffering is metaphysically necessary."[37] She does not endorse everything Rolt says, but she does not seem to disagree with this point. It is good that God should make material creatures including and especially human beings, and perhaps He simply *could not* have made us any nearer to Himself on the metaphysical ladder and so *could not* have made us such that we would not suffer and do horrendous evils.

The Augustinian tradition consistently and adamantly denied this suggestion. Nobody knew better than Augustine that being embodied could cause terrible problems, but the very fact that we suffer and struggle and are at war with ourselves indicates that there is a proper order, a peace which is natural to us.[38] We recognize that something is *wrong*. In our present condition it is difficult for spirit to govern bodily appetites, but that is not to say that it is metaphysically impossible. Most of us manage some of the time, and some of us manage most of the time. It is clearly conceivable that God could have made us such that all of us *could* manage all the time. Some things Adams says might suggest that she is not entirely at odds with this position. For example she writes, "...human heterogeneity makes it extremely difficult for us to "get our acts together" to move towards virtue,..."[39] This could imply that it is difficult, *but not impossible* for us to rise above the uncleanness of our hybrid nature. And again, she castigates those who would, "overestimate the capacity to subdue, with discipline, one's "lower" nature and to shoulder the responsibility to decide one's own destiny."[40] To "overestimate" is quite different from imagining what does not exist.[41]

But it seems to me that the bulk of the texts support the interpretation that in Adams's view human nature is intrinsically "defiled" such that we

could not possibly *choose* to rise above participation in horrendous evils. Adams says, "...at the most basic level, sin is uncleanness, an outgrowth of two metaphysical roots [the metaphysical gap and the hybrid nature]....Human uncleanness is thus a consequence of twin metaphysical necessities. The metaphysical gap results from what the Divine essence and human nature *are*, quite apart from any exercise of either agency....The issue is not one of *individual* misbehavior or unique conditions, but pertains to humans insofar as they are members of humankind [italics in the original text]."[42] And the following seems a clear statement of the *impossibility* of a human nature which is intrinsically properly ordered, as opposed to being fixed by divine intervention: "Through the lens of purity and defilement categories, we can see clearly how obstacles to Divine-human at-one-ment [the metaphysical gap and our dualistic nature] are irresolvable apart from superhuman powers to organize and to mend, to reclassify and to harmonize into an inclusive functional unity,...God alone has the creative imagination and persuasive power to organize utopian society."[43] It seems fair to conclude that the "sin" of uncleanness is unavoidable, according to Adams. Perhaps she does not entirely deny human freedom, but were it to play any significant role in her story this would undermine her basic theme of offering alternatives to what she sees as the failure of the free fall strategy.

In supporting her view against the Augustinian position, Adams holds that, "...the lens of purity and defilement focuses the difficulties caused by metaphysical straddling, allows us to take seriously our experience of human agency confronted by horrors, and to replace a priori idealized models with a more empirical psychology."[44] Regarding the point about "empirical psychology" the Augustinian will respond that the social sciences deal with mankind as it is. The traditional view is that man is as he is because of his failure at the pre-dawn of history. Contemporary psychology is not in a position to assess that point.

Moreover, contrary to Adams's point about taking seriously "our experience of human agency confronted by horrors," the phenomenology of evil, at least of the evil of *sin*, will not allow that our behavior is a consequence of our status as spiritual animals struggling to survive. There is nothing really *wrong* with the fox eating the rabbit or the lion killing the cubs of its rival. Mammals mammaling may cause and endure suffering, but they are just doing what their God-given natures require, and it's better that they exist than not. Auschwitz is radically different. If genocide were just the human animal doing what God made it to do then it would be unreasonable to say that it *should not have happened*. I trust that most of my readers share my non-negotiable intuition that Hitler really ought not to have ordered the Final Solution. Genuine evil, in the Augustinian view, is at odds with God and hence with the entire created universe which He causes and imbues with value. It is, contrary to Adams's analysis, radically *un*natural.

At first glance, Adams's suggestion seems reminiscent of the Platonism and Manicheanism that Augustine defeated a millennium and a half ago. For the Augustinian tradition the bottom line was that associating evil with matter contradicted divine omnipotence. There could not be in the universe a power (with the possible exception of free creatures whom God

chooses to create) which could conflict with the divine will. Adams often writes as if the uncleanness associated with embodied spirit has a positive power at odds with good. Citing Mary Douglas on purity and defilement, "...Douglas offers a social-anthropological analysis of cleanliness metaphors and institutions in terms of twin ideas: that dirt is stuff out of order and that stuff out of order is both powerful and dangerous."[45] "The calculus of purity and defilement presupposes that cleanness is fragile and dirty is catching. Prima facie plausibility favors this axiom. After all, it takes hours to sparkle the kitchen, which is instantaneously messed by spilled milk or muddy shoes." She goes on to add that, "Nevertheless, the oxymoron of Divine defilement challenges, the New Testament upsets, reverses the direction of contagion: it's holiness, not defilement, that's catching!"[46] God, in Christ, can miraculously reverse the "contagion", but the implication is that in the normal order, "dirty is catching."

But if, because of the power of defilement, God *cannot* make us any better then we are, then isn't His power limited by the source of evil? Isn't Adams promoting a Manichean denial of divine omnipotence? In fact, the Manichean appearance is only prima facie. Adams's view is not that the "dirty" has some power independent of God and capable of producing consequences contrary to His will. Adams apparently sees evil as suffering which is the inevitable result of the distance we are from God and the uncleanness of our hybrid makeup. But these are necessary elements of our God-given natures, and it is good that we exist. Thus it is not the case that evil "should not be."

Adams's view entails the denial of the existence of evil in the Augustinian sense of sin. The Augustinian draws a radical distinction between the sinner and the innocent, whereas Adams apparently does not see any difference *that makes a difference* between the victim and the perpetrator of horrendous evil. Undoubtedly she would recognize some sort of distinction; the perpetrator is the one holding the gun *outside* the barbed wire, while the victim is the one with the shaved head *inside* the barbed wire. But in explaining how these two came to be participants in horrendous evil and in discussing how that participation is ultimately to be overbalanced by good, the distinction plays absolutely no role. This conspicuous failure to differentiate occurs at the outset when she defines horrendous evils as "evils the participation in which (that is, the *doing or suffering of which*) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt [my italics]...." Nowhere in the book does the distinction between victim and perpetrator play an explanatory role, whereas the *lack* of a difference is reiterated throughout. "Many are unable to get beyond their contamination and accusations, to surmount their despair of being able to find any meaning in their lives given what they've suffered and/or done."[47] "...I am interested in that part of the work of Christ that sheds light on Divine defeat of horrendous evils in the lives of all participants (victims as well as perpetrators)."[48] "In the crucifixion, God identified with all human beings who participate in actual horrors — not only with the victims (of which He was one), but also with the perpetrators. For although Christ never performed any blasphemous acts in His human nature, nevertheless, His death by crucifixion made Him ritually cursed.., and so symbolically a blasphemer. Thus, God in Christ

crucified is God casting His lot with the cursed and blaspheming (and hence the perpetrators of horrors) as well."[49]

Adams concludes that everybody will enjoy a beatific afterlife. God will provide sufficient concrete goods to outweigh the horrendous evils in which one may have participated, and sufficient symbolic goods to give meaning to the suffering. And the story of salvation is the same whether one is merely a victim or also a perpetrator of horrors. The traditionally minded philosopher of religion is likely to find this extremely counter-intuitive. How could the path to glory be the same for the one who *does* evil as for the one who merely suffers from it? I argued that the Augustinian system could allow for universalism, but only on terms that would not blur the distinction between the choice for or against God. One option is that, faced with the choice, everyone freely chooses God. A second option is that God allows a split-level salvation, with the upper tier occupied by those who choose Him freely, and the lower by those whom He's had to coerce. So everybody enjoys eternal beatitude. But in either scenario the path for the sinner and the sinless (were there any) would be radically different. The sinner has to *repent*. Repentance would be unnecessary, or rather impossible, for the sinless, if there were any, since they would have nothing to be sorry for.

Adams, on the other hand, never distinguishes between the road to salvation followed by the perpetrator and that followed by the victim, and this flows smoothly from her world view. Remember that Adams has denied us the dignity of being moral agents in the Augustinian sense. We are more like infants. When we suffer and inflict horrendous evils this is the inevitable consequence of the metaphysical gap and our hybrid uncleanness. It is, as Adams has said, a result of what we *are* not of what we *do*. We are not responsible for what we are, and so the perpetrator of evils is no different from the victim when it comes to being blameworthy.

But this has far-reaching and profound consequences. The notion of *repentance* is central in Christian thought and practice, in private prayer and in communal liturgy. But if what we do inevitably follows from what we are, and we are as God made us, then we couldn't help ourselves and repentance is inappropriate. Adams writes that, "Retrospectively,...God's becoming a blasphemy and a curse for us will enable human perpetrators of horrors to accept and forgive themselves."[50] But her analysis entails that the perpetrator should instead come to recognize that he has nothing to forgive himself for since he has simply acted out of the natural uncleanness he shares with his victim and all humankind.[51]

Nor is it clear that the perpetrator has even *behaved* in a way which is objectively worse than the way the victim has behaved. Adams, at least at times, seems to deny moral realism in favor of the view that the various codes of human behavior were invented by us to preserve society. She protests, "I have not denied morality a place at the table [among schemes which have proved their usefulness in contributing to social order and stability] or contested its usefulness in regulating contemporary societies. Nor have I doubted that we have moral obligations to refrain from genocide,..."[52] But if she is really committed to conventionalism (I mentioned above that there is reason to advance this interpretation only tenta-

tively), then genocide is morally wrong because it will undermine the stability of our society. But nothing in her analysis suggests any objective ground for endorsing the value of preserving our stable society. Most of us may find a stable society conducive to our comfort, but those who don't find our society comfortable or who have other goals besides comfort may reasonably choose not to subscribe to conventional morality.

She said very clearly that we cannot behave more or less appropriately in relation to God "...any more than a worm's wiggling to the right could be intrinsically more respectful of humans than its wiggling to the left." It would seem to follow that genocide is no more or less appropriate behavior from the divine perspective than an ant war would be from mine. The conclusion seems to be that, in addition to the perpetrator of horrors not being any more *blameworthy* than his victim, there is no reason outside of human convention to judge his actions worse than those of his victim. And this, too, has dire consequences.

Most contemporary philosophers of religion probably find even the hint of moral conventionalism a grave objection to Adams's view. But if Adams is serious in her suspicion of moral realism perhaps this criticism will not trouble her. The Augustinian tradition has a corollary point to raise, though, which may speak more directly to the heart of Adams's argument. Adams, though she denies moral obligations to God, does not doubt that God is good and loving. Her method involves drawing conclusions based on an analysis of these divine attributes. In this she is in agreement with the tradition. But what do these terms, "good" and "loving" mean, and how did we human knowers come to understand their meaning? Presumably we come to acquire them (or, for the innatist or illuminationist, we arrive at the point where we can *access* them) through our experience in the world. We learn what it means to be a good and loving person through our dealings with the good and loving people around us and perhaps by contrast with the bad and hateful people. The tradition held that we can carry these terms over to God, whether analogously or univocally, because the good and loving person especially reflects and imitates God, whereas the bad person destroys the image of God in himself.

And herein lies the problem for Adams. The metaphysical gap which she envisions entails that our goodness is as incommensurate with God's as the goodness of the infant is with the adult's, or the goodness of the worm with the human being's. We are all at the same, vast, distance from God. Further, our uncleanness is metaphysically necessary, so none of us is objectively blameworthy. And, if we take her moral conventionalism seriously, no behavior is objectively morally wrong. Sin and sinner are abolished and everyone is, in the final analysis, equally "good". Adams may be happy with that conclusion since it makes sense of universalism. But it follows that the term "good" is eviscerated of positive content. If Hitler and Mother Teresa are both at the same metaphysical distance from God and equally unclean because of their hybrid nature then, though perhaps by some conventional human assessment Hitler is "bad" and Mother Teresa is "good", there is no value difference between them viewed objectively and in relationship to God. If this is the case, then our human understanding of the term "good" cannot be carried over to God. But if God is

not "good" in some way which human beings can grasp, then discussion predicated on His possession of that attribute is vain.

Adams has shrunk humanity to such an extent that our concepts, which we derive from our experience of the world around us, cannot bridge the metaphysical gap between us and God. And then it is not possible to assess how that transcendent God across the gap could be expected to treat His vermin on this side. Even should He reach across the gap and assume our nature, *His* nature, *modus operandi*, and goals must remain opaque to us. Adams's charitable goal was to assure everyone a place at the table, but her alternative to classical Augustinian theodicy apparently renders the term "good" conventional with respect to man and hence equivocal with respect to God. Her abolition of sin entails denying meaningful goodness to God.[53]

University of Delaware

NOTES

1. I defend this view in "Anselm's Indeterminism," in *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) pp.91-101.
2. After Aquinas some medieval philosophers, like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, endorse versions of voluntarism with respect to the will of God and accept divine command theories, and so fall outside of the tradition as I will outline it. The extent to which later Christian philosophers subscribe to this Augustinian tradition is beyond my expertise to say.
3. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) p.26.
4. And both Augustine and Boethius hold that even a comparatively comfortable life would not be worth living were there no God. See e.g. *City of God* XIX, 4; *Consolation of Philosophy* III.
5. *City of God* XIV, 5.
6. For a contemporary exposition of this view see Peter van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988) pp.161-187.
7. Adams (1999) p.27.
8. Katherin A. Rogers, "Evil", Chapter 10 of *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) pp.144-146.
9. This is Anselm's argument regarding Satan's sin in *On the Fall of the Devil.* Presumably he would make an analogous case for human beings.
10. Anselm deals with this issue in the third section of *On the Harmony of the Foreknowledge and Predestination and Grace of God with Free Will.*
11. Adams (1999) p.38.
12. Adams (1999) p.38.
13. *Why God Became Man* I, 21.
14. Rogers (2000) pp.149-152.
15. Adams (1999) pp.43-49.
16. *Enchiridion* 29, 112-113.
17. A third universalist option would be that those who reject God consistently eventually blink out of being so that everybody who's left is in heaven.

But here, of course, God does allow the creature to destroy itself; a conclusion which Adams holds to be inconsistent with divine goodness. Augustine et al. would not approve of this view either, since they hold that it is better to exist even in a state of suffering than not to exist at all.

18. Adams (1999) p.104.
19. Adams (1999) p.104.
20. Adams (1999) p.192-193.
21. Adams (1999) p.206.
22. Adams (1999) p.192-193.
23. Adams (1999) p.196.
24. Adams (1999) p. 95.
25. Adams (1999) p.96.
26. Adams (1999) p.97.
27. Adams (1999) p.112.
28. Adams (1999) p.87.
29. Adams (1999) p.94.
30. Adams (1999) p.95.
31. Adams (1999) p.165.
32. Adams (1999) p. 96.
33. Adams (1999) p.49.
34. *On Free Will* III, 12-17.
35. I take it that some political instincts can lead to the conclusion that equality is the *sine qua non* of a good order. It is unjust that some should be rich and some should be poor, and if everyone can't be rich, better everyone should be poor. This strikes me as a principle which treats envy as the key to value and clearly has no place in the City of God.
36. Notice that nothing in the argument depends on God's having moral obligations to us. The traditional line is that God, whose nature is to be the Pure Act which is the source and standard for all good cannot do less than the best. Whether it follows that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds is a separate question.
37. Adams (1999) p.73.
38. *City of God* XIX, 12-13.
39. Adams (1999) p.95.
40. Adams (1999) p.103.
41. I am grateful to a referee for this journal for this suggestion.
42. pp. 94-95.
43. Adams (1999) p.103.
44. Adams (1999) p.103.
45. Adams (1999) p.92.
46. Adams (1999) p.99.
47. Adams (1999) p.99.
48. Adams (1999) pp.164-165.
49. Adams (1999) p.166.
50. Adams (1999) p.167.
51. It strikes me that blurring the difference between forgiving someone and deciding that they didn't really do something wrong is now a common practice, but it is one which the Christian would do well to guard against.
52. Adams (1999) p.192.
53. I would like to thank the University of Delaware Philosophy department reading group, and especially Michael Rea, for useful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to thank a referee for this journal whose criticisms led to significant improvements.